

I Can Fight You on Thursday . . .

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Cliff Crumpleton was a born bully. All his life, he had worked hard at being the best bully he could be. He always wore his collar up, and his pointed black boots were just the right kind for kicking. With spiky red hair and bushy eyebrows, and a long scar on his left cheek, he could curdle your milk just by looking at it.

Already, he had beaten up most of the boys at Nathan Hale School. There was still one boy, though, whom Cliff had never fought—Marshall McPhee. It wasn't because Marshall was big or strong or mean. His head only came up to Cliff's chin, and when he flexed his muscle, it hardly showed at all. Always neatly dressed and well-spoken, he wasn't exactly the kind of guy you would choose for your gym team. But he seemed to get along with most everyone. It wasn't Marshall's fault that Cliff hated his guts.

For some strange reason Cliff had never found the right time and place to beat up that pipsqueak. Something always seemed to get in the way. It was really starting to bug him. After all, his reputation was at stake.

So, one day, at the end of lunch period, Cliff yelled across the courtyard. "Hey, McPhee, come here! I wanna talk to you."

"Yes, what do you want?" said Marshall, who was trying very hard not to show how much he was shaking.

"Ya think you're pretty smart, don't ya?" said Cliff, poking his finger at Marshall's chest. "How come you know so many things?"

"Well, I guess it comes from reading a lot," said Marshall. He didn't think it wise to mention that his I.Q. was easily twice that of Cliff's.

"Just because you're hot stuff in class don't mean nuthin' out here. From now on I want you to call me Mister Crumpleton. Is that clear, McPhee?"

"Yes, Cliff—I mean, Mr. Crumpleton," said Marshall, who really didn't care what Cliff wanted to be called. It was no big deal.

Cliff smirked and tilted his nose up in the air. "And another thing . . ."

But Marshall was nowhere in sight.

"Slippery little runt," muttered Cliff. "I thought for sure I'd get him to fight me, this time."

Next morning, Cliff, his bare muscled arms folded, was waiting at the classroom door. He blocked the way as Marshall tried to go in. "What's the password, McPhee?"

"Oh, that's right," said Marshall, looking at his watch. "Excuse me, Mister Crumpleton."

"Not so fast. Before you go in, you gotta do something for me," said Cliff, pointing down at the floor. "Kiss my feet."

Marshall stared at Cliff for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders. "All right, if you insist. I'm pretty much over the scabrofibrosis. And I don't think the germs would penetrate your shoes, anyway. . . ." Then he started to bend over.

"Wait!" shouted Cliff, waving Marshall away. "Never mind, you can kiss my feet some other time."

That afternoon, Cliff was waiting outside the school gate. "That does it!" he shouted into Marshall's face. "Are you gonna fight me or not?"

"Well, why didn't you say you wanted to fight?" said Marshall. "I'll see what I can do for you." From his pocket he took out a small black book and began to scan through it. "Let's see now . . . Tuesday is out. That's my orthodontist appointment. Wednesday, maybe. No, that's when our rock-etry club is meeting—we're scheduling our first launch. Now Thursday . . . yes, that's open. How is that for you?"

Cliff frowned and put his freckled nose right up to Marshall's. "Look, I don't care what day we fight. If you want to chicken out till Thursday, I can wait. Just be here at three. I'm gonna go practice with my punching bag. Be sure and write that in your little black book!"

On Thursday, at five minutes to three, Marshall walked slowly out to the gate. Wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase, he didn't look much like a fighter. A crowd of students had gathered to watch. Some had their hands over their eyes. What would Marshall do? Was he planning to hit Cliff over the head with the briefcase? It would not be a pretty sight.

Without saying a word, Marshall walked up to Cliff and stuck his straight in the eye. Then he opened his briefcase and took out a large book entitled *Weapons of the World*.

"Before we get started, we'll have to choose weapons," said Marshall. He began thumbing through the pages. "Let's see now . . . how about cross-bows?" He held up the book and showed a picture to Cliff. "Or here's an early Greek fighting man. We could use the same kind of spear and small shield. Rather dashing, don't you think?"

"What do you mean, choose weapons? We're just gonna fight, that's all. Come on, put 'em up!"

"Not so fast," said Marshall, holding up his hand. "If we're going to do this, we're going to do it right." From his briefcase he pulled out an official-looking paper and handed it to Cliff. "Since I presume you choose fisticuffs, would you mind first signing this agreement?"

"What the heck for?" said Cliff, who was just about to crumple it.

"It merely states that you agree in our fight to abide by the Marquis of Queensbury Rules. Surely, as a fighter, you must be familiar with them," said Marshall.

"Okay, okay," said Cliff. "I know all about fighting rules." He grabbed the pen from Marshall and scribbled his name on the paper. "Now let's get on with it!"

Marshall took off his suit jacket and hung it on a tree. Then he rolled up his sleeves and looked at his watch. "It is now precisely three o'clock." And with that he held up his fists.

At that moment, however, there came a loud ring from somewhere near the tree.

"Now what?" said Cliff, waving his fists in the air.

"Excuse me," said Marshall. Calmly, he walked over to where his suit jacket was hanging and pulled out a small cell phone. "Hello? Yes, he's here. Just a moment, please. It's for you, Cliff."

"Gimme that!" yelled Cliff, grabbing the phone from Marshall. "Hello . . . who is this? No, I don't need no life insurance. Why would I want life insurance, you jerk?"

Then he threw down the phone and stomped and stomped on it, until there was nothing left but bits of plastic and colored wire. With mouth foam-

ing and eyes bulging, he walked around to see Marshall. All right, McPhee, no more games. This is it!"

But Marshall was nowhere in sight.

Next morning, Cliff cornered Marshall outside of homeroom. "That was some disappearing act you pulled, wise guy," he said, "but it won't do you no good. I'm going to pulverize you before you can even think about it." And with that he grabbed Marshall's shirt collar and pulled back his fist.

"Too late, I thought about it," said Marshall. "And that's a good word, 'pulverize.' You know. . ."

But at that moment Mr. Nordbottom poked his long nose around the corner. "What's going on here?"

"Oh, nothing," said Cliff, suddenly unclenching his fist and sliding his hand from Marshall's neck to his shoulder. "I'm just showing my good friend Marshall here how to pass a football."

"That's what I like to see," said Mr. Nordbottom. "It's all about teamwork."

Just as soon as Mr. Nordbottom was out of sight, Cliff poked his finger into Marshall's chest, nearly pinning him to the wall. "OK, McPhee. Same time, same place. You be there today or else. I know where you live. And this time no papers, books or briefcases. Just bring your little fists!"

Precisely at five minutes to three, Marshall walked out slowly past the gate. An even larger crowd than before had assembled, so much so that the fight had to be moved to the nearby athletic field. The bleachers were completely full. Some students had even set up lawn chairs, and a hot dog vendor was working the crowd. Two students, each with expensive looking camcorders, were there to film the historic event.

"You don't mind if I get this on film, do you?" asked Marshall.

"I don't care if you make it into a freakin' movie," said Cliff. "There'll be plenty of blood and guts . . . **your** blood and guts."

As Cliff advanced menacingly, he glanced up at the cameras. "I'm going to beat the . . . no, I'm going to pulverize you into a million tiny pieces." He strutted and swaggered, in a way he thought any good bully should.

Marshall, double-checking his pocket watch, nervously scanned the sky as if looking for a miracle. He had never been beat up before, and imagined that it would be quite painful.

The crowd was deathly silent. Cliff circled around Marshall like a great white shark toying with its prey. Tearing off his shirt, he flexed his muscles and arched his body for all to see. A young girl in the front row swooned.

As they met on the field, Cliff grabbed Marshall's collar and pulled back his fist in dramatic slow motion.

"I'm going to beat you so hard that you'll forget all you ever knew. I'm going to blast you right into the ground like a rocket falling on your head. You'll be nothing but dust in a big hole. And on top of the crater they'll put up a sign that says, Cliff Crumpleton, Master Bully of the World. But enough talk. Here it comes, McPhee . . ."

But Marshall just looked up at the sky with a weird smile. For at that very moment the large rocket that his rocketry club had launched last Wednesday came hurtling back to earth. It was 3:05 and right on time. Under the circumstances, he had decided to bring it down without its parachute. And it smashed into the ground just behind Cliff, precisely where Marshall had predicted. The shock wave knocked Cliff right into the large crater it made.

The crowd fidgeted and strained to see through the dust cloud. When it cleared, they all cheered at the sight of Marshall, arms folded on his chest, proudly standing at the edge of the crater. A few minutes later, Cliff slowly climbed out. He rubbed his sore chin and gazed up at Marshall in total amazement, thinking that that was the hardest punch he had ever received . . . like being hit by a rocket.